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ANTIQUÉ RUGS



The Rug Caravan

AMONG the authoritative writings about rugs, one of the clearest, although one of the briefest, is the catalogue prepared by Dr. Wilhelm R. Valentiner, Curator of the Decorative Arts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for the exhibition of rugs held a few years ago in that institution. It was in the introduction to this catalogue that Dr. Valentiner disposed of the "Polish" carpet or "Polonaise" rug myth—an achievement which of itself made the catalogue noteworthy.

Speaking of antique Oriental rugs in general, the Metropolitan Museum's Curator of the Decorative Arts states that three centuries are especially distinguished by their excellence in rug weaving. These are the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth. To the seventeenth century, particularly the first half, Dr. Valentiner assigns all the so-called Polonaise rugs and most of the so-called Ispahans; to the sixteenth

century the greater part of the Persian animal-rugs. In the fifteenth century, or even before that, were made the rugs of an archaic type, such as the so-called dragon rugs, and some of the Asia Minor rugs with geometrical designs. These oldest rugs are exceedingly rare. Dr. Valentiner finds them characterized by a beautiful severity of design and strong, harmonious contrasts of colour, their early popularity in Europe being witnessed especially by the frequency with which they occur in Italian paintings from the fourteenth century through the sixteenth as backgrounds for portraits, or as the decorations of tables and thrones.

Connoisseurs in old rugs will remember the exhibition of the Yerkes collection, a marvelous collection "which will probably never be equalled," and in which Persian animal-rugs were the most important features. Students find as typical of the whole Turkish rug

group, a preference for geometrical linear patterns, sometimes varied with strongly conventionalized leaf motives. Only occasionally are found animal motives in the designs of these rugs; and in these exceptional cases they are supposedly borrowed from Persia and in any event, are redrawn in the geometrical style. The patterns lack the flowing, curved lines found in Persian rugs, also their rich interlacings of arabesques, naturalistic flowers and leaves, and their imaginative garden and hunting scenes. Straight and rectangular lines characterize the pattern of the rugs of Turkish type especially those of Asia Minor.

Those from the eastern part of Asia Minor and Armenia date further back than any other class of Oriental rugs; and while opinions still differ somewhat on this point of dating, it is not impossible that some of these rugs are as early as the thirteenth, or at least the fourteenth century, when the art of the Near East came under Chinese influence as a result of the Mongolian invasion. This influence, although less noticeable in the centuries immediately following, is discoverable a second time in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—as, for example, in the Persian animal-rugs, for at that time the trade relations between Persia and China were especially active. Characteristic of the early rugs is the use of such distinctly Chinese motives as the dragon, phœnix and other animals of a very archaic conventionalized type, somewhat similar to conventionalizations in early Chinese bronzes, and also the use of primitive floral motives mediæval Chinese in character.

A fresco in the hospital at Siena by Domenico di Bartolo, painted about

1440-43, in which one of these early rugs is represented, enabled Dr. Bode to determine that at least it antedated the painting. In all probability the type of rug belonged to the end of the fourteenth century, if not earlier. This rug has the typical Chinese motive, sometimes known as the “Ming coat-of-arms,” the dragon fighting with the phœnix, which occurs also, but in more naturalistic treatment, in a Persian animal-rug of about 1500 in the possession of the Metropolitan Museum, and formerly in the Yerkes collection.

“Holbein” rugs, the oldest known rugs from the western part of Asia Minor, are given the name of this artist because a typical example of rugs of this class is found in Holbein’s masterpiece in the museum at Darmstadt. Such rugs often were used for decorative purposes in their pictures by the early Flemish painters, from Jan van Eyck and Memling to Gerard David, as well as by Italian masters of the same period. They are presumed to have been imported to Europe throughout the whole of the fifteenth century. Their purely geometrical pattern consists of stars, of squares of different size with interlaced ornament. Only in a few rare motives—highly conventionalized small cypress trees of palmettes, and branch forms, which were perhaps derived from the convention itself of the arabesque—are found any survival of an early naturalistic style. As these exceedingly rare Holbein rugs remind one of modern Bergama rugs, these latter would seem to have been woven in imitation of the old floor coverings.

A certain class of Asia Minor rugs mostly of the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries can be assigned to the looms at Ushak, because similar rugs still are produced there, the typical design being of large stars, mostly in blue with yellow outlines, on a warm yellow ground. The old rugs often occur in Venetian paintings of the sixteenth century and in Dutch and Flemish paintings of the seventeenth.

As for Persian rugs, their designs excel in richness of motives. This is due to the superior imaginative qualities of the Persians, from whom the Turks, as well as the East Indians and later the Chinese, borrowed and adapted (as already noted in the case of the Turks) many ideas. "In fine rhythm of lines, and beautiful colour schemes, Persian rugs have never been surpassed. In style they hold a position between the Turkish rugs, with their absolutely geometrical and purely decorative art, and the Indian rugs, whose motives are based on naturalistic studies. The Persian designers also turned to nature, and it is always possible to recognize the flowers, leaves or animals that they introduced into their designs, but at the same time they did not carry their imitation of nature so far as to lose the decorative quality gained by confining the representation to a few planes."

Dr. Valentiner makes it clear that while in Turkey the court had apparently little influence on the development of weaving, in Persia the art became more and more an accessory of luxury and wealth under the influence of a number of shahs, especially of the Safavid dynasty, who gave their immediate attention to this development. Thus, in Persia silk rugs were made earlier and in greater number than in any other country, and in the

first part of the seventeenth century were even sent as gifts to the European courts. The Curator holds that it probably was at the command of Tamasp I (1524-1576) that the famous mosque rugs were woven for Ardebil, the capital in northern Persia. These rugs, four in number, comprised the famous Ardebil rug now in the South Kensington Museum, with its companion piece that was sold at Yerkes sale, and the two smaller rugs, one in a private collection in Berlin and the other now in the possession of the Metropolitan.

Typical of all these rugs which were woven in the sixteenth century at a centre influenced by the court in Persia, are beautiful flower-designs with arabesques and Chinese motives; and the characteristic colours are a prevailing deep red and deep blue on which the pattern stands out in light yellow or silver thread. Differing, however, from these deep tones of the sixteenth century rugs are the lighter and more delicate colours of the silk rugs, commonly known as Polonaises or Polish rugs—a difference which seems to indicate a later date of manufacture. Indeed, it is possible to assign these rugs to a brief period that can be almost exactly dated between 1600 and 1650, as rugs of this type, very probably made in the imperial manufactories, were mostly sent as gifts from Shah Abbas of Persia to the European courts during this time.

The name Polonaise dates from the Paris Exposition in 1878, when several rugs of this type were exhibited by Prince Czartoriski from Warsaw, some of them with the coat-of-arms of the family, embroidered later. Their distinctly non-European style of design

made it difficult to accept the attribution of Polish workmanship; and, indeed, documents have lately come to light which show conclusively that these rugs were not made in Poland. "Polish" rugs—so-called—still exist in large numbers, certainly not less than three hundred. The best pieces are preserved in European courts, such as those of Moscow, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Munich, and in other places where they have been kept in perfect condition since the seventeenth century.

It is well here to call attention to the story that gave rise to the designation of these rugs as "Polish," a story that sprang up about the time the Czartoriski rugs were shown in Paris, when it probably was not realized that the coats-of-arms were put on later. The story had it that a wealthy Polish traveler in Persia, became so enamored of the rugs he saw in that country that he engaged a number of Persian weavers, took them back to Poland where he set up looms and had woven the rugs now known as "Polish." According to Dr. Valentiner, as above, the story is a myth.

Oriental rug weavers are of three kinds: the Khilim, the Soumak, and the rug with pile. The first of these weavings and the earliest type of Oriental rug is that known as the Khilim. It is a rug of warp and weft only, consequently has a smooth surface. The weft, which is dyed, is carried over and under the warp threads by means of a needle. The designs being made by using weft thread of different colours, open spaces appear between the warp threads wherever the changes of colour are made; and as the weft ends are cut off close to the fabric, the back and

face of these rugs are absolutely alike. The numerous open spaces between the warp threads and the similarity of the two sides are unfailing signs of Khilim weave.

The second form of weaving is a development of the Khilim, and is commonly called "Cashmere," though the proper name should be Soumak, which is an abbreviation of Shemakha, the name of the town in the Caucasus where this weaving is done. It is a rug of warp, weft, and stitch. A stitch flat woven with a needle on the warp, making another kind of Oriental rug with a smooth surface. The distinguishing feature of the "Cashmere," or Soumak is the long, loose ends of stitch yarn at the back of the rug.

The third and last form of weaving—the rug with a pile—is a rug of three members—warp, weft, and knot; the knots tied by hand, one at a time and usually in rows, on the warp threads; the weft being merely a binder, drawing the knots close together.

These knots in turn are of two kinds, the Sehna or Persian, and the Ghiordes or Turkish. When the Sehna knot is used the pile threads come to the surface of the rug between each two strands of warp. The result is a rug with fine texture, short pile, and sharply defined design. When the Ghiordes knot is used the pile threads come to the surface only between each two pairs of warp threads. The result is, comparatively, a coarse rug with long pile and less detailed design.

While the wearing quality of rugs made in the Ghiordes and Sehna knots differ, this is not due to the difference in the knot, but rather to the difference in the amount and angle of the pile.

Pile that is long and lies flat, as in most of the rugs of Ghiordes weaving, has substance and "give" enough to resist hard wear. Pile that is short and up-

make them. These are identified by innumerable details of design, material, construction and finish.

Through the Altman bequest the



Shiraz Prayer Rug

right, as in most of the rugs of Sehna weaving, is compact, but light and resistant. In the three kinds of weaving there are produced over one hundred different kinds of rugs, named after the towns and districts in which they are made, and after the people who

Metropolitan Museum of Art secured a famous prayer-rug, made in north Persia about 1580.

What is a prayer-rug? The very name, of course, signifies that it is a rug to be used in prayer, but there are details connected with its design and

use that make it worth while to answer the question in a brief article.

Every Mohammedan has his prayer-rug, more or less valuable according to his means. This he always carries with him and upon it he prostrates himself five times a day, when the appointed hour for prayer arrives.

By use of a small compass, he spreads his rug so that the mihrab or niche points towards Mecca, where Mohammed's body lies. He removes all jewelry and money from his person, in order to appear before god in the most abject humility, then combs his beard, and produces a rosary of ninety-nine beads and a dried cake of earth which came from Mecca. These he places just under the niche. Resting his head on the earth from Mecca, with his hands outstretched on either side, he performs his devotions.

The mihrab or niche on which the worshipper places his head represents to him the door of a mosque and is intended to remind those who use it of the sacred mosque at Mecca.

More rarely prayer-rugs will be found with three or more niches. They occur especially among the Caucasian products, and are intended for children or for family worship. Other rugs may have instead of a prayer niche, three small medallions, one each intended

for the hands and one to receive the forehead.

For convenience the prayer-rug naturally is of small size. It is usually from two and one-half to four by four to six feet. Those intended for personal use frequently have the name of the owner on and are of the very best workmanship. Combs and other objects used in the act of worship are frequently depicted in or near the prayer niche.

Mr. G. Griffin Lewis, in "The Practical Book of Oriental Rugs," published by the J. B. Lippincott Company, shows how prayer-rugs may be classified, the prayer niche assuming various forms in different kinds of rugs, seldom more than one class having the same form. As a rule that of the Persians is formed by curved lines, while all others are formed by straight lines, those of both the Persian and Turkish classes being pointed, while those of the Caucasian and Turkoman classes may either be pointed or flat at the top, usually the latter.

In differentiating between these various classes, the collector is assisted not only by the shape of the mihrab, but also by the several field designs, such for instance as the panels above and below the prayer field, the lanterns or pendants which hang from the centre of the niche, etc.